

By **DAWN STARIN**  
CONTRIBUTOR

**LUANG PRABANG, LAOS**

**L**uang Prabang, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in the north-central part of Laos, has often been described as a gentle backwater, an oasis of peace and tranquillity, a real-life Shangri-La lost in time and space.

But in the center of Luang Prabang, not far from the banks of the mighty Mekong, is a revolutionary learning experiment – @ My Library ([www.thelanguageproject.org](http://www.thelanguageproject.org)). This small program has big hopes and aspirations for the many students who walk through its doors.

On the ground floor, two novice monks wrapped in orange robes sit at computer terminals practicing English. A high school student sits before another terminal playing Scrabble. Upstairs, one young man reads a science book, another reads a history book, and a third is engrossed in a novel.

Students who normally have no access to quiet places for concentration have found a quiet oasis where they can read and learn in silence.

Laotian folk tales and books on art and history are very popular, as are a variety of Hmong language books. Dictionaries, novels, and nonfiction round out the collection. The library contains about 1,200 books, all carefully selected to be appropriate for the users in terms of reading level, subject, and language.

This may not be a huge library, but it is one of the best in the country – 85 percent of the books can't be found anywhere else in Laos.

Students are able to check out volumes free for two weeks. Currently, about 1,000 books a month are borrowed, and almost all are brought back on time.

Artistic endeavours are also taken seriously @ My Library. Volunteers have given photography classes using donated cameras that can be borrowed, sending Lao, Hmong, and Khmu students out to snap photos of people and places, creating a record of today's Laos.

On a large table in the back of a sunshine-filled room, Touy Thavixay, a first-year university student, looks

“This project is not just about book learning,” says Ms. Kresge. “Memorizing facts and spitting them out again is not what we do. Here it is about thinking and analyzing and problem solving. Here it is about giving students self-confidence so that they can learn to question themselves, me, the greater world outside these doors.”

Every day, about 150 users, usually between the ages of 14 and 27, take off their shoes, check their bags, and enter the library's door. They come from many different places: English-language colleges, business colleges, accounting schools, high schools, novice's schools attached to the Buddhist temples, teacher training colleges, the law school, the university, and the nursing college.

Kresge explains that anything is on the agenda. “If someone wants a specific book, we try and get it. If they want to learn a particular subject, we try and find someone to teach it, if they want to practice a craft, we will try and find the space. We look for gaps in the market and try to fill them,” she says.

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PHOTOS BY DAWN STARIN

**QUIET STUDY:** In Luang Prabang, Laos, @ My Library contains about 1,200 books and provides a place to study, above, and to learn new skills. Below, Carol Kresge, founder of the project, helps a student.

# NO LIMITS AT THIS LAOTIAN LIBRARY

through his portfolio. Imaginative prints of elephants and Laotian faces and landscapes spill across the table.

This space is also a gallery. All the photos on display are for sale, and each time one is sold, the photographer receives half the money and the library keeps half. The students are mastering a craft, learning about running a business, and earning money at the same time.

But @ My Library, learning doesn't end with reading, writing, and photography. Nor does it stop at the end of the day. After hours, budding musicians use the music studio to record Lao and Hmong music using guitars, keyboards, and synthesizers.

This drop-in center is where young Laotians are given the encouragement and support to learn anything they want to learn. Besides offering photography, advanced computing skills, and music lessons, the library also makes available classes in Lao and English typing skills, five different languages, Japanese calligraphy, and artwork – all available for the asking and all free.

American Carol Kresge founded this experiment in 1999. At that time, almost no one in the area was able to use a computer or even control a mouse. Now the students spend a total of 25,000 hours on the computers each year, creating websites, reformatting hard drives, and even building their own computers.

One of the students has actually developed a computer-based Lao-English talking dictionary – the first of its kind in Laos.

of classes on English for working in a restaurant,” she relates. “We actually set up a pretend restaurant with real food, and we all practiced greeting, serving, and eating in a restaurant. It was a real eye-opener for me and for the students. I realized that many of the students had never eaten in a restaurant, and many of the students realized that a restaurant venue is not the same as one's own home.



“By encouraging creativity, curiosity, thinking, and pride in an environment that is fun, we empower people to pursue their interests and realize their dreams,” she adds. “This is a place where young people come to help each other, learn about problem solving, and where students realize that they, too, can learn skills, gain professional experience, and even become mentors to other students.

Has she ever had any ideas for the library that were failures?

“I don't think of things as failures,” Kresge says. “I have to be positive, hopeful. And anyway, every so-called failure is actually a success. We learn from our mistakes. That is one of the important lessons we have to share with the students who come in this door.”

Manned by Kresge and five Laotian staff members, the library is open six days a week, 55 hours total. It also gets help from tourists in the area who volunteer through the Stay Another Day program ([www.stay-another-day.org/project/My\\_Library/introduction](http://www.stay-another-day.org/project/My_Library/introduction)).

“Education is not just about book learning,” Kresge says. “To be really educated it is necessary to understand yourself and others, to know your own culture and history and that of others. Hopefully we are encouraging that. We are giving access and experience and opportunities, and we are setting a standard, a high standard, and we are succeeding.”